



Riach, A. (2016) Looking at Robert Henryson, one of the world's greatest poets. *National*, 2016, 16 Dec.

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/161522/>

Deposited on: 30 April 2018

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

## **Robert Henryson: one of the world's greatest poets**

**Alan Riach**

It's said that after studying church law at Glasgow University, Robert Henryson (c.1435-c.1505) became a schoolmaster attached to the Benedictine Abbey in Dunfermline, whose manuscript collection was a major resource. His poems embody the great themes of literature: the need for moral reform, the vanity and the vulnerability of living things, the desire for justice and fairness in a world crossed by violence, the reach beyond the self, the quest for harmony. There are three major achievements in his work.

In his version of Orpheus and Eurydice, Orpheus travels through Heaven and Hell looking for his beloved Eurydice, to restore human sexual order to the harmony of the planets in their orbits. The mathematical precisions of his journey through the stellar system in search of lost love are a contrast with the poem's human message: search as methodically and thoroughly as you will, but you won't find Eurydice in Heaven. You have to take the risk of a journey into Hell to find her.

The story is pre-Homeric, from the world of Greek myth, before the siege of Troy or the travels of Aeneas and the founding of Rome, or Odysseus's voyages, first home to Ithaca, and then the final journey to the west. Myth is the key: Orpheus is masculinity, looking for his female counterpart. He embodies the principle of song: his only weapon is music. When he finally discovers Eurydice in the deepest reaches of Hell, he persuades her captor that she must be released. On the way back to earth's surface, Eurydice looks back, and is taken back below, to the shadowlands. But she returns each year to the earth, for a limited time.

This is the familiar version of the story, which is of course the rhythm of the seasons: Eurydice is spring. Song brings her back to the world and she stays, happily, through summer, till autumn starts to send her back to earth and earth's depths, once again. The cycle is also a metaphor: procreation, regeneration. The rhythm is repeatable, as the mathematical precisions of the poem show, when Orpheus journeys through the stars – but there is always a risk, always an uncertainty, always something human to care about, to yearn for.

Henryson's second great achievement is his reworking of Aesop's Fables, transferring their location to distinctively Scottish farms and small towns and surprising the reader with unpredicted moral explanations. The general point made by each of them is that to judge only by external appearances is disastrous. Each fable describes an encounter and then delivers a "Moral" at the end, which might overturn all reasonable expectations. In "The Cock and the

Jasp” a cockerel spots a jewel on the dunghheap, finds it inedible and walks away. He seems to have taken the wise decision but the Moralitas tells us that the jewel is all the difficult wisdom, “perfite prudence and cunning, / Ornate with mony deidis of vertew...” So we should respect and acknowledge the quality of the jewel above “the sempill corne” or we are no better than fools, scornful of science and ignorant of learning.

The moral endings surprise us when they reinterpret what’s gone before but the fables are engaging because of Henryson’s vivid depictions and visual immediacy. His language is attentive to both narrative subtleties and visual impact, and he writes dramatic dialogue, with the animals engaged in eyebrow-raising quizzical responses to what’s around them and to each other. However, in “The Wolf and the Lamb” no amount of rhetorical persuasion can save the lamb from the wolf’s hungry jaws: when they come to a river, they both drink: “bot not of ane intent: / The wolfis thocht wes all on wickitnes, / The selie lamb was meik and innocent”. The wolf “drank his blude and off his flesche can eit”. And the moral?

The pure pepill this lamb may signifie – [poor  
As maill-men, merchandis and all laboureris, [small tenant-farmers  
Of quhome the lyfe is half ane purgatorie  
To wyn with lautie leving as efferis; [To win their livelihood honestly and aptly  
The wolf betakinnis fals extortioneris  
And oppressouris of pure men – as we se –  
Be violence or craft in facultie. [manipulating human nature

In “The Paddock and the Mouse” an ugly-looking toad offers to ferry a mouse across a river, arguing that “Thow suld not juge ane man efter his face”. Halfway over, the toad tries to kill the mouse – so appearances sometimes can in fact be revealing of deeper reality. A kite flies down and carries them both away. The Moralitas is categorical: the mouse is the soul, the toad is the body, the kite is death. Meaning is not secure and violence always threatens social civility or religious piety. The distractions of surface delights can kill sensitivity to deeper, unseen or obscure meanings.

Ane fals intent under ane fair pretence  
Hes causit mony innocent for to de.  
Grit folie is to gif over-sone credence  
To all that speiks fairlie unto the.

There are thirteen fables. Read in sequence, they explore increasingly dark and violent situations. Some are comic and all have the liveliness of tales where the main characters are figured as anthropomorphised animals with tell-tale human characteristics. The prayer for peace which underlies them all is energised by compassion and sympathy every bit as much as by the authority of church law – perhaps more. People are always vulnerable. So, beyond the conventions of allegory, there is a human sense of touching.

And touching is at the heart of Henryson's masterpiece. The Testament of Cresseid is one of the great works of world literature, a proto-humanist tragedy with intensely realised characters and a pantheon of inhuman gods. The essential story of The Testament comes from the Homeric tales of the war when the Greeks besieged Troy. Troilus and Cresseid were on opposite sides, brought together, fell in love, parted by dictates of conflict, and their separate lives run different courses to death. In Chaucer's version (c.1382-86), they are fully human characters subject to the authority of Chaucer's own belief-system. In Henryson's, Troilus and Cresseid look upon each other searchingly, yearning for recognition. Beyond the self, each wants the other to confirm their own past love and show some human sympathy in the face of the truth that time has turned rotten. But Cresseid in her leprous blindness cannot see, and Troilus cannot recognise her any more. Each tries to reach beyond their own identity and their failure is human failure, not dictated by cosmic schema or medieval church preordination. This is what touches us.

The poem begins by linking the weather, the character of the poem and the state-of-mind of the poet:

Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte  
Suld correspond and be equivalent:  
Richt sa it wes quhen I began to wryte  
This tragedie – the wedder richt fervent...

The poet is alone in his study, looking out:

The northin wind had purifyit the air,  
And sched the mistie cloudis fra the sky;  
The froist freisit, the blastis bitterly

Fra Pole Artick come quhisling loud and schill...

The poet reflects that he had once trusted Venus, Queen of Love, to keep him warm-hearted and youthful, but now he must retire to the fire in his private room. He has known love and the end of love and now builds up the fire, pours himself a drink and takes down a book, Chaucer's story of Troilus and Cresseid. But then, he tells us,

To brek my sleip ane uther quair I tuik,  
In quhilk I fand the fatall destenie  
Of fair Cresseid, that endit wretchedlie.

And he asks, "Quha wait gif all that Chaucer wrait was true?"

After Troilus and Cresseid have loved and parted, she takes up with another lover, Diomed, and then suddenly we are moved into the story with the word "When..." ("When" is always a great way to begin a dramatic story because it leads to at least two things happening at the same time: "When this was happening, that was also happening...") When Diomed has had his fill of Cresseid, he abandons her. She withdraws into her own private room, echoing the introspective movement of the poet, and cries out her regret that she ever believed in Venus and Cupid, also echoing the poet's disillusionment with love. Another "When": "Quhen this was said, doun in an extasie, / Ravischit in spreit, intill ane dream scho fell..."

And in this dream, the Gods appear: cold, omnipotent Saturn, with chattering teeth, blue lips and lean, thin cheeks: "Out of his nois the meldrop fast can rin"; burly, golden-haired Jupiter, "richt fair and amiabill" but carrying a spear in his right hand; Mars, "With reid visage and grislie glowrand ene"; Phebus, "lanterne and lamp of licht"; Venus, come to answer Cresseid's charge: "Bot in her face semit greit variance – / Quhyles perfyte treuth and quhyles inconstance"; Mercurius, "eloquent and full of rethorie"; and finally, Lady Cynthia, the lovers' moon, portentously dark because all her light is taken from the sun: "Hir gyse was grey and ful of spottis blak", foreshadowing the leprosy that will disfigure Cresseid. Cupid appears and condemns Cresseid for her curse on him and his mother. The Gods confer and pass judgement, Saturn's gentleness belying the cruelty of the sentence: she is to be excluded from fairness and mirth, denied the health she has enjoyed, live in pain and suffering, and die a beggar.

"The Complaint of Cresseid" then follows, a beautiful lament for the passing of youth and life's cruelty: "Thair is na salve may saif the of thy sair" she acknowledges: "Nocht is

your fairness bot ane faiding flour”. But the poem has a further twist to deliver. Cresseid, finally in the company of lepers, lifts up her blind head towards Troilus, riding by, who almost recognises her:

Than upon him scho kest up baith her ene –  
And with ane blenk it come into his thocht  
That he sumtime hir face befor hid sene.  
Bot scho was in sic plye he knew hir nocht;  
Yit than hir luik into his mynd it brocht  
The sweit visage and amorous blenking  
Of fair Cresseid, sumtyme his awain darling.

Cresseid speaks of herself as a warning to all others of the uncertainty of love and makes her final testament, surrendering her “corps and carioun” to be torn apart and eaten by worms and toads, whatever gold she has to be given to the leper-folk and to return the ring given her by Troilus, back to Troilus. Her spirit she says she would leave to the goddess Diana, to “walk with her in waist woddis and wellis”. The irony of the promiscuous woman bequeathing her spirit to the goddess of chastity is both hard and heartbreaking. Troilus receives the ring, remembers Cresseid and collapses in sorrow, but he pulls himself together to console himself with perfunctory judgement: “Scho was untrew and wo is me thairfoir.”

In Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* (c.1602), the rottenness of politics and warfare corrupts all innocence and silence seems the only appropriate response. The two young lovers remain ambiguous characters: how deep is their commitment? How far is the expedient move dictated by force of circumstance? The sharp poignancy of crushed idealism that persists somewhere in their story may have been drawn directly from Henryson, as Shakespeare almost certainly read Thomas Speight’s 1598 or 1602 edition of Chaucer’s works, which included Henryson’s poem. Henryson’s version has all of Shakespeare’s ambiguity and more piercing poignancy than Chaucer. In Henryson, Troilus and Cresseid are prophetic of those fully-realised, psychologised, physically palpable characters of nineteenth-century fiction, yet they’re inescapably also medieval depictions, signals, forms.

The big question is to what degree you think Henryson’s sympathy lies with them. Troilus is the more conventional figure yet because of his fixed role, when the chink in the armour appears, and he almost sees the leprous Cresseid for what she once was, thinks of

what love was, for a moment, and drops her some money, he is both pathetic and the kind of person anyone might be. Cresseid is far more severely blasted by judgement.

The poem's ending might seem to uphold an orthodox medieval view of women as sinful corruptors, daughters of Eve. The rule of the gods, whom Cresseid defies both courageously and petulantly, is vicious. You can't help thinking that Henryson himself must have had some sympathy with her. No sensitive reader could fail to allow her spirit, freed from suffering, its place beside Diana, wandering through woods, by woodland rivers. But Henryson cuts short indulgence in such sentiment: "Sen scho is deid, I speik of hir no moir."

The poem ends without reassurance, except of what humanity is. Maybe this is the real reason it speaks to us across centuries, even now, at the dog end of the year: whether you're Catholic or Protestant, Christian or Muslim, atheist or agnostic, American or European, anything else or unaligned, it doesn't matter. None of these things makes you superior. What the poem gives us of Cresseid's humanity, her suffering, aspiration and hope, is what counts. It matches anything in Chaucer or Shakespeare. It bites so deep at the heart.

[Boxed off:]

The last two stanzas of Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*:

Sum said he maid ane tomb of merbell grey,  
And wrait hir name and superscriptioun,  
And laid it on hir grave quhair that scho lay,  
In golden letteris, conteining this ressoun:  
"Lo, fair ladyis! Cresseid of Troyis toun,  
Sumtyme countit the flour of womanheid,  
Under this stane, lait lipper, lyis deid."

Now, worthie Wemen, in this ballet schort,  
Made for your worschip and instructioun,  
Of cheritie, I monische and exhort:  
Ming not your lufe with fals deceptioun.  
Beir in your mynd this schort conclusioun  
Of fair Cresseid – as I have said befor.  
Sen scho is deid, I speik of hir no moir.